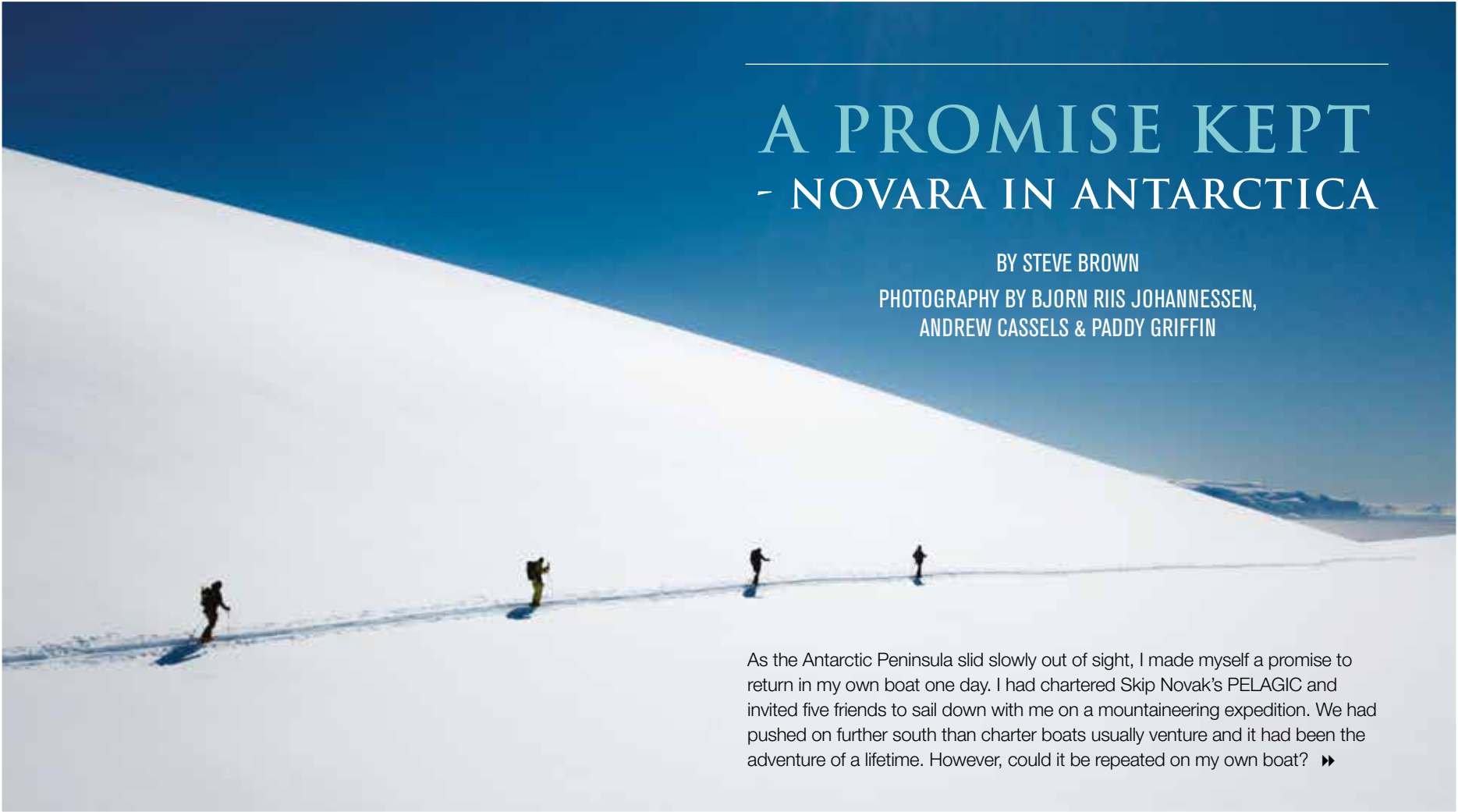




GRANDIDIER CHANNEL



SKI TOURING ON THE RECLUSE PENINSULA

A PROMISE KEPT - NOVARA IN ANTARCTICA

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As the Antarctic Peninsula slid slowly out of sight, I made myself a promise to return in my own boat one day. I had chartered Skip Novak's PELAGIC and invited five friends to sail down with me on a mountaineering expedition. We had pushed on further south than charter boats usually venture and it had been the adventure of a lifetime. However, could it be repeated on my own boat? ►►

It was now 11 years later. I had bought my unique Aero rigged schooner NOVARA, in Camden - Maine, sailed north through the Northwest Passage, explored Alaska and the inside passages of British Columbia and had amazing wildlife experiences over the Monterey Trench & in the Sea of Cortez.

Together we had explored the Chilean channels, Patagonia, Tierra del Fuego, the Falkland Islands and South Georgia - amassing memories that will last a lifetime. I kept my promise and headed south from the Falkland Islands on NOVARA and once again sailed further south than most yachts dare to go.

We tested NOVARA and ourselves against the sea, ice and mountains in this amazing part of the world...

Following on from our trip to South Georgia in the southern spring of 2017, NOVARA was left in Stanley, the capital of the Falkland Islands, over Xmas and the New Year. She awaited my return for the next adventure to Antarctica. With all hands turned to, a week's preparation saw everything ship shape (well almost) and we set sail with the forecast of a good 5-day weather window.

We made the 685nm passage to the South Shetlands in just under 4 days, with winds dropping as we approached the islands.

The GRIBs were forecasting 30 knots from the north east in the Bransfield Strait. We altered course to the west to transit the island chain through the English Strait and run south before the wind, to our planned landfall of Deception Island.

Once through the straits we made a fast passage but in rapidly deteriorating weather.

Wind building to 45kts, driving snow reducing visibility to 30m or less and ice and snow building up on the rig, sails and deck.

From Deception Island we headed south, with our first anchorage in Faff Cove and the second on Two Hummock Island. It was here where we met up with the charter yacht ICEBIRD.

It was probably a first for two Aero rigged yachts to meet in such a remote anchorage as Antarctica. Even with Amyr Klink, a frequent visitor to the Peninsula, on board his Aero rigged schooner PARATTI II.

The wildlife was, as always, awe-inspiring. Orca, Humpback and Minke whales. Weddel, Crabeater and Leopard seals. Penguins everywhere!



GOOD CONDITIONS CROSSING DRAKES PASSAGE



STOPPED BY ICE 66 DEGREES SOUTH



TWO HUMMOCK ISLAND, NOVARA NEXT TO ICEBIRD



WRECK ON ENTERPRISE ISLAND



ANCHORAGE ON PETERMANN ISLAND



LEMAIRE CHANNE

The anchorages were spectacular. From the super safe mooring alongside the wreck on Enterprise Island... To the less than bombproof anchorage we found tucked into the back of the bay on Two Hummock Island!

We were able to get a ski team ashore on Two Hummock Island but plans for a longer multi-day tour were sadly cut short by more bad weather rolling in.

As is usual down on the Peninsula, we encountered mixed weather - usually light winds and poor visibility, but also days of blue skies and astonishing clarity. The journey through the Errerea Channel to the anchorage at Waterboat Point was memorable for the many whale encounters, the sheer volume of ice in the water as well as the 100s of grounded bergs.

The passage south through the photogenic Lemaire Channel was made in perfect conditions - bright blue skies, no wind and enough ice in the water to make things interesting.

The overnight anchorage on Petermann Island was a little snug. We backed slowly into the slot and tucked into the rocky inlet with all chain used on the heavy bow anchor and four lines ashore keeping us safe.

From there things did not go exactly according to plan. Our original aim of getting south of Adelaide Island and into the back of Marguerite Bay was foiled by a wall of impenetrable ice south of Larrouy Island. We tried to skirt around this wall but found that it stretched out to Renaud Island and a change in the wind direction resulted in a battle to break out of a large band of 7/10ths ice before we could turn north to a safe anchorage on Duchaylard Island.

We had to make a decision to head south by going around Renaud Island and down the outside of Adelaide Island or back north to find our fun elsewhere. The decision was made to head north but en-route we had to thread our way through a wide area of huge grounded icebergs, with one unlike anything I had ever seen before.

We headed back north and worked our way through the ice filled Lemaire Channel once more and around to Port Lockroy.

After a day or so exploring the area we moved on to the secure anchorage at Portal Point on the Recluse Peninsula. I had been here once before in 2007 and made a successful ascent of Harris Peak in perfect conditions. ►►

As we approached the peninsula, we saw a large group of whales, mostly in pairs, swimming slowly and criss-crossing the entrance to Charlotte Bay. Their behaviour struck me as unusual and we slowed and watched them for some time. We moved on to work our way through the grounded bergs and over the rock ledge into the anchorage. It was only when we had anchored, with four lines ashore, did we notice a newly dead Humpback whale calf washed onto the rocks.

We could see that there was no indication of attack by Orcas, nor any evidence of collision with a large vessel. The carcass was intact. Not even the birds had found it yet!

I emailed the Polar Desk at the Foreign and Commonwealth office and asked them to who I should report the calf. I was passed on to the British Antarctic Survey who asked us to take tissue samples and more photographs. I was left wondering if the behaviour of the Whales at the head of the bay had anything to do with the dead calf.

The weather during our time at Portal Point was superb and gave us some great ski touring and opportunities to explore the bay. It was noticeable to me how much more sea ice there was compared to our visit in 2007. There was a lot more brash and many more large grounded bergs than before. This was also evident in the bare rock that could be seen around the bay, the number and size of the crevasses that

we encountered and the large serac band that now barred the way up the approach slope to Harris Peak.

Time was no longer on our side and we had to think about the journey back to the Falkland Islands. With no obvious weather window we decided to make for Deception Island and wait there until conditions improved. Although we had settled weather in the safe anchorage of Telefon Bay, the weather out in the Drake was less than favourable.

Finally, after five days, the GRIBs showed a breezy but favourable weather window and we headed out for what would prove to be a fast four-day passage back. Conditions en-route gave us 25 to 35 knots of mostly westerlies with some boisterous seas after the previous five days of storms.

We had not achieved our original objective to get into Marguerite Bay but any trip to Antarctica is filled with both wonder and uncertainty. It is truly one of the most amazing places on earth but even here, climate change is having an impact with knock-on consequences for the wildlife that can be found whilst exploring.



GIANT BERGS IN THE GRANDIDIER CHANNEL



HUMPBACK WHALE CALF WASHED ONTO THE ROCKS



PORTAL POINT



TELEFON BAY, DECEPTION ISLAND, ANTARCTICA